DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 679 UD 021 063

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TITLE Blacks in Boomtown: The Economics of Houston's Black Community.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 24p.; Paper prepared for the Southwestern Sociological Meeting (Houston, TX, April 2-5, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Community; Business Cycles; Case Studies; Community Development; Differences; *Economic Climate; *Economic Development; Economic Opportunities; Economic Research; Income; Inner City; Racial Bias; Residential Patterns; Rural to Urban Migration; Unemployment; Urban Areas
IDENTIFIERS *Texas (Houston)

ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the extent to which Houston's black community has benefited from the economic boom that the area is experiencing. The major issues addressed, using Houston as a case study, include (1) residential housing patterns, (2) black unemployment, (3) black-white income differentials, (4) black business and economic development, (5) black homeownership, and (6) rediscovery of the central city. The results show that the economic boom has had varying impacts on areas within Houston. While the overall Houston picture may indicate a vigorous and dynamic economy, a sizable segment of the black community has received few gains associated with the boomtown economy. The unemployment rate of area blacks continues to be significantly higher than that of area whites; there still persists an income gap between black and white households despite increased employment opportunities; residential segregation and housing market discrimination appear to be the predominant factors in structuring the patterns of residential areas; and the back-to-the city movement has intensified the competition between the poor and non-poor for limited resources within the inner city. (Author)

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OCT 15 1980

ED194679

BLACKS IN BOOMTOWN: THE ECONOMICS OF HOUSTON'S BLACK COMMUNITY

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Paper prepared for the Southwestern Sociological Meeting, Houston, Texas, Hyatt Regency Hotel April 2-5, 1980.

UD021063

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This paper assesses the extent to which Houston's black community has benefited from the economic boom that the area is experiencing. The major issue areas addressed using Houston as a case study included: (1) residential housing patterns, (2) black unemployment, (3) black-white income differentials, (4) black business and economic development, (5) black homeownership, and (6) rediscovery of the central city. The results show that the economic boom has had varying impacts on areas within Houston. While the overall Houston picture may indicate a vigorous and dynamic economy, a sizable segment of the black community has received few gains associated with the boomtown economy. The unemployment rate of area blacks continues to be significantly higher than that of area whites; there still persists an income gap between blacks and white households despite increased employment opportunities; residential segregation and housing market discrimination appear to be the predominate factors in structuring the patterns of residential areas; and the back-to-the city movement has intensified the competition between the poor and non-poor for limited resources within the inner-city.

BLACKS IN BOOMTOWN: THE ECONOMICS OF HOUSTON'S BLACK COMMUNITY

Introduction

There can be little doubt that the economic boom that Houston is currently undergoing is attracting many individuals and families to the area. In addition, the Houston SMSA averaged a net employment gain of over 72,500 annually. Growth appears to occur in a disproportionate rate in professional managerial and clerical occupations. The Texas Employment Commission (1979) estimates that the professional and managerial jobs will account for over 32 percent of the net employment gains over the next six years; the clerical fields will account for nearly 25 percent. Thus, it appears that those persons who relocate to Houston with marginal skills may be hard pressed to find gainful employment. In sum, Houston's job market is highly technically-oriented and competitive.

Housing for the nation's urban dwellers continues to be a problem despite the private and public efforts that have been made over the past forty years. This problem is further compounded when minority status is involved. Specifically, a disportionate number of black families are ill-housed when compared to the general population. In short, the housing problem is a national phenomenon. This paper focuses on the status of black housing in a city that has been described as the "golden buckle of the sunbelt": Houston, Texas. Houston is unique in a number of respects: namely, (1) Houston is the energy capital of the world, (2) it is the fifth largest city in the United States

with over 1.6 million residents, (3) it leads the nation in terms of housing starts, (4) it is the largest city in the South, (6) it has the largest number of blacks of any city in the South, and (7) it attracts over 5,000 new residents to the area each month (Houston Chamber of Commerce, 1976). A major question which this paper seeks to address is: To what extent has the black community benefited from the boom and prosperity in Houston.

Houston's Residential Housing Patterns

Houston's land area has continued to expand outward from a mere 9 square miles in 1850 to over 540 square miles in 1978 (Houston City Planning Department, 1978). The black population is located in a broad belt that extends from the south-central and southeast portions of the city into northeast and north central Houston. Residential segregation is the predominate pattern of neighborhood growth and development (Davidson, 1972:33). Over three-fourths of the black residents in the city live in census tracts that are more than 70 percent black (Farrell et al., 1978). The black population in the area has steadily increased over the past twenty years. In 1950, there were 125,000 blacks in Houston (or 21 percent of the city's population). By 1970, the number of blacks had increased to over 317,000 (26 percent of the city's population).

Black Unemployment

Because of the diversified nature of the Houston economy, the

city has continued to expand in economic and business development. The city's unemployment rate continues to be one of the lowest of any major U.S. City. At present, the overall unemployment rate for the city stands at 3.9 percent, while the national unemployment rate for June, 1979 was 5.6 percent. The unemployment rate for blacks in Houston is also better than the nation as a whole (See Table 1). The National unemployment rate was 11.3 percent for blacks in June, 1979; for blacks in Houston for this same period it was 6.4. Blacks in the Houston Metropolitan area are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as whites. Black females have the highest unemployment rate of any group (Texas Employment Commission, 1979). The "double whammy" continues to operate in the case of black females who are victims of race as well as sex discrimination. These factors ultimately affect the earning capacity of black women.

(Table 1 about here)

Affirmative action efforts in the public and private sectors have had mixed results. The National Urban League's (1979) report, The Widening Economic Gap, estimated that for the period 1974-1977 over 3.5 million new jobs were created in private industry; some 53 percent of these new jobs went to white women, 26 percent went to white men, 12 percent went to Hispanics and 5 percent of these jobs went to Blacks and Asians. An additional one million new jobs were created in government or the public sector for this same period; some 37 percent of these new government jobs

went to white women, 25 percent to blacks, 19 percent to white men, 9 percent to Asians and 9 percent to Hispanics.

The unemployment rate among black teenagers is in a deplorable state. According to a recent study by Dr. Andrew Brimmer (1979) about 41.4 percent of black inner city teenagers were unemployed, compared with 36.0 percent in the suburbs and 35.1 percent in nonmetropolitan areas. These figures point to the problem of unemployment that black teenagers encounter regardless of their residence.

The implications of the extended unemployment of the nations' black youth simply mean that an entire generation may pass through their teens and early adulthood without ever being gainfully employed. As one's job habits are formed in the early years, the absence of gainful employment during the early years is likely to have negative consequences on the individual and society in general. Present efforts to combat this problem have often fallen short. In addition, efforts are now underway to curtail or reduce funding for youth training and employment programs. A case in point is the loss of millions of dollars by Houston's CETA program. The cutback in social and economic programs at the time when unemployment is on the upswing may have serious consequences for the urban complex. In this strategy, the poor seems to bear the burnt in the "war" against inflation.

Black-White Income Differential

The U.S. has one of the highest standards of living in the world. The median family income of all Americans in 1977 was $16,000. Minorities continue to lag behind the earnings of their white counterparts. For example,

the median income for Cuban-Americans was $14,000, for Mexican-Americans $11,742, and for Puerto Ricans the median income in 1977 was $7,972. The median income for blacks was $9,563 in 1977. The income gap between blacks and whites in this country continues to widen (National Urban League, 1979). The black median income which had risen to 61 percent of white's income in 1970, dropped to 59 percent in 1972 (Holmes, 1973). When one translates these figures into dollars, it means that for every $100 that a white family has to buy goods and services, a black family has only $59 to buy these same products. The ratio of black to white family income in 1977 was 57 percent (the widest gap ever during the 1970's).

The income gap between blacks and whites varies from city to city. For instance, Houston has been singled out as one of the "best" cities in the U.S. for blacks. This argument has been recently made in such popular publications as Black Enterprise Magazine and Ebony. The median income of black Houstonians in 1977 was $14,608, while the median income for white Houstonians was $18,839. Thus, the "average" black family earns approximately 77.5 percent of what an "average" white family earns in Houston (See Table 2). While the income discrepancy between black and white families in Houston appears to be large, the Houston picture is somewhat better than other major U.S. cities. In 1977, the median income for blacks in Washington, D.C. was $15,570 (one of the highest of any major U.S. city), while the median income for whites in the area was $25,509. Blacks in D.C. have a higher median income than blacks in Houston. However, the income gap between blacks and whites in Washington, D.C. is greater than that for blacks and whites in Houston. Black families

in Baltimore, Chicago and Philadelphia earn less than half the income of their white counterparts.

From city to city, the earning capacity of black households is below that of white households. The efforts to improve the economic conditions of the black masses have fallen short. Special efforts from government and the private sectors have assisted some families out of poverty. However, the social and economic structure of the American system may create and perpetuate a "permanent" underclass which is poor and black. The fulfillment of the "American Dream" for these persons may be an impossibility. In short, this underclass may be locked into poverty.

(Table 2 about here)

Cost of Living in the Urban Complex

One cannot read the newspaper or listen to television without being bombarded with information on inflation and the erosion of the standard of living in the U.S. Individuals and families are leaving cities that they perceive as expensive. Historically, cities in the northeast are more expensive to live in than the South or Midwest. The South as a region has had by far the lowest cost of living (and the lowest income of any region).

The U.S. Department of Labor (1977) computes annual cost of living for 40 U.S. Cities. These cost of living figures are computed for a hypothetical urban family of 4 with a non-working wife and two children. The cost of living is broken down into three levels: lower-income, middle-income and upper-income. The data in Table 3 present the cost

of living in selected U.S. cities. As indicated earlier, those cities with the highest cost of living are located in the Northeast; and the cities which are least expensive are located in the South.

The cost of living in Houston for a lower-income family is $9,221, middle-income $15,488, and upper-income is $22,421. As a city, Houston ranked 7th lowest in cost of living averages among the forty cities surveyed by the Department of Labor. The costs of housing and transportation are pushing the cost of living upward for Houston. The influx of new residents into the area has placed a strain on the housing market as well as the highways and freeways (the basic mode of transportation in Houston continues to be the private automobile).

(Table 3 about here)

Black Businesses

Minorities constitute over 18 percent of the population in the United States, but comprise only 4 percent of the total number of businesses. The gross receipts of minority businesses constitute less than 2 percent of business receipts in the U.S. The U.S. Department of Commerce's Report on Minority Business Enterprises: 1970 indicates that while forty percent of Houston's population is minority (Black and Hispanic), less than 5 percent of Houston's businesses are owned by minorities (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1971).

Black-owned businesses are located in the cities which have large concentrations of blacks. The data in Table 4 indicate that the total number of black businesses has been increasing for the period 1969 through 1972. The metropolitan areas of New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and

Chicago have by far the largest number of black-owned businesses in 1972. The number of black-owned businesses in Houston increased from 4,376 in 1969 to over 5,477 in 1972. As minority firms tend to locate geographically according to the location of the minority population, it is expected that minority firms are likely to continue expanding in those cities that are experiencing growth in its black community. At present, some twenty-two states account for 83 percent of the minority population and 84 percent of the minority-owned businesses.

The continued success of the black-owned firms have direct implication on the economic viability of the black community. The recessionary spirals have direct effect on the standard of living and quality of life in the black community. A troubled economy often spells doom to many black businesses and black workers. Thus, economic development programs as well as reinvestment efforts are first steps in the direction to make the black community more self-sufficient.

(Table 4 about here)

Black Homeownership

Homeownership is one of the basic forms of savings investment and accumulation of wealth. The rate of homeownership has been steadily rising in the nation since the 1940's. At present, nearly two of every three Americans own their home. Spiraling housing costs have now made it difficult for many middle-income and lower-income families to become homeowners (U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1977). Blacks must contend with high housing costs along with housing market

discrimination. These factors make it difficult for blacks who seek to become homeowners. Nationwide, only 42 percent of black families are homeowners. The South, as a region, leads the nation for blacks who own their homes with 47 percent as black homeowners (Blackwell, 1975). In Houston, 48.4 percent of the black residents were homeowners in 1972. Comparable figures for other southern cities indicate that 45.4 percent of Dallas's blacks were homeowners; 39.9 percent of Atlanta's blacks owned their homes; and 31.2 percent of New Orleans blacks are homeowners (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972).

Housing Discrimination

It has been over ten years since the Federal Fair Housing Act prohibited racial discrimination in housing in the United States. However, blacks still do not enjoy complete market freedom in housing (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1978; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1979). Houston's Fair Housing Ordinance is four years old. This ordinance created the Fair Housing Division which became operational on July 9, 1975 (City of Houston Fair Housing Division, 1978). Houston Fair Housing Ordinance prohibits discrimination in the sale or rental, the financing of housing and the provision of broker services on account of race, color, sex, religion or national origin.

As of April 18, 1979, Houston's Fair Housing Division had received over 1,200 housing discrimination complaints; seventy-five percent of the complaints were filed by blacks, twenty percent were filed by Hispanics and five percent of the complaints were filed by Anglos (Edwards, 1979).

The pattern of housing discrimination complaint activity has come largely from the renter segment of the population. Housing discrimination complaints seem to correspond to the growth patterns of the city. Specifically, complaints are more frequent in the southwestern section of the city which has experienced a rapid build-up in multi-family dwellings; and housing discrimination complaint activity is greatest in areas of low minority population (Bullard, 1979; Bullard and Tryman, 1979). Housing discrimination has taken on a more "sophisticated" nature which makes it difficult to document or prove.

Black Suburbanization

Nationwide, the black population in the suburbs increased by 1.5 million during the period 1960 to 1970, whereas the white counterpart rose by 33.3 million (U.S. Department and Urban Development, 1978). While blacks are moving to the suburbs in larger numbers, no national black suburban trend has been demonstrated. Houston's blacks have not made the move to the suburbs in significant numbers. A recent study on black suburbanization indicates that the black share of Houston's suburban population decreased as the white population grew at a much faster rate (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1979). Specifically, blacks comprised 13 percent of the Houston's suburban population in 1960; the 1970 figure for blacks had dropped to less than nine percent. The city's black population in the suburbs increased by 7.7 percent over this same period; this increase is attributed to the city's growth rather than the movement of blacks to the suburbs. Black suburbanization does

not necessarily mean that blacks are relocating to integrated neighborhoods in the suburbs; it often represents an extension of the segregated housing patterns long typical of the city. Blacks often become resegregated in the suburbs (Blackwell, 1975; Bollen and Schmandt, 1975; Schnore, 1976; Grier and Grier, 1978; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1979).

Re-discovery of Central City Neighborhoods

The housing market response to increased competition for limited housing appears to have placed lower-income and minority families at a disadvantage in securing decent housing. This is especially true for Houston which receives over 60,000 new residents each year; approximately one-fourth of these new residents are black. The decline in vacancies and a slow-down in housing construction, without a corresponding drop in demand, all contribute to the beginning of a housing shortage (Houston Chamber of Commerce, 1976).

The re-discovery of the inner-city has been accelerated by such factors as the energy shortage, the spiraling cost of housing construction (e.g., new homes) and previously owned homes, and the desire to live in close-in neighborhoods. Neighborhood revitalization of older neighborhoods has been used as one strategy to re-build declining areas. However, revitalization efforts have often fostered racial and ethnic exclusion and displacement of the indigenous residents (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1978). Inner-city neighborhoods are becoming the "in" places to live as more and more young middle-class families (most of whom are white) "reclaim" these areas.

Elizabeth Ashton (1979) in a recent article appearing in Houston City

Magazine describes the movement of whites back to the close-in neighborhoods. Close-in neighborhoods are said to be "hot", and "where the action is" as far as real estate. The inner-city has something that the "gentry" wants: new-town older houses. The end result of whites search and seizure of these older areas is gentrification. That is, "gentrification is white flight to the inner-city, the middle-class - usually young, professional couples - returning to the slums returning to the imigrant neighborhoods, or the seedily respectable neighborhoods that their great-grandparents might have passed through on their way up and out to the suburbs" (Ashton, 1979: 43). The costs associated with rehabilitating an older house in the inner is cheaper than costs of new construction in the suburbs. In Houston, a three bedroom home in the suburbs cost about $35 to $41 per square foot, while a rehabbed building in the inner-city is in the $35 or under per square foot range.

The psychological and financial barriers once associated with inner-city neighborhoods (e.g., redlining) are gradually being lifted in selected close-in neighborhoods. Lending institutions have systematically denied mortgages to residents of designated geographic areas; the practice of redlining is a chief contributor to urban decay.

CONCLUSIONS

In reviewing the economic status of Houston's black community, the data analyzed herein corroborate the notion that a sizable portion of Houston's population has not benefited from the area's growth and booming economy.

Moreover, the large in-migration of persons into the area has intensified the competition between the poor and non-poor for limited resources. The long established patterns of residential segregation and housing discrimination continue to deprive blacks in Houston of decent housing.

The economic boom that Houston is experiencing has not had the same impact in all neighborhoods. This point is clearly illustrated by the differential unemployment rates among blacks and whites. Blacks in Houston are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts. Many black neighborhoods are locked into a state of permanent economic "depression".

The opening up of opportunities to blacks and other minorities, in the employment area has had little impact in narrowing the income gap between black and white families. While there can be little doubt that nearly everyone is making more money, white median income is rising faster than that of blacks. The black-white income disparity varies from city to city. However, the black-white income difference is smallest in Houston than in any of the major U.S. cities.

Although two of every four Houstonians can be considered an ethnic minority, less than 5 percent of the area's businesses are owned by minorities. Blacks are severely underrepresented in the construction, wholesale trade, major finance, banking insurance and real estate businesses. The recent downturn in the economy is likely to spell doom for many black small businesses.

The shifting of emphases from the suburbs to the central city or near-town areas have generated rumors and speculation about the future of lower-income

neighborhoods (e.g., many of which are predominately black). As strong neighborhood-based association are non-existent in many lower-income and minority areas, the new urban homesteaders are likely to reclaim these areas with little resistance.

Table 1. Labor Market Estimates for Houston Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, June 1979[a]

Ethnic Group	Population	%	Labor Force	%	Unemployment	%
All Races	2,637,000	100.0	1,400,800	100.0	54,300	3.9
Females, All Races	1,341,400	50.9	512,300	36.0	26,400	5.2
Black	511,700	19.4	257,700	18.4	16,400	6.4
Hispanic	282,200	10.7	126,100	9.0	4,800	3.8
Other Minorities	21,200	.8	8,400	.6	500	6.0

[a]Source of data is from Texas Employment Commission Labor Market Estimates, Affirmative Action Information, June 1979. The Houston Standard Metropolitan Statistical area (SMSA) includes Brazoria, Fort Bend, Harris, Liberty, Montgomery and Waller Counties.

Table 2. Median Income for Selected U.S. Cities by Race, 1977

City	Race		% of Black Income to Whites
	Black	White	
Houston	$14,608	$18,839	77.5%
San Francisco	14,058	20,589	68.2%
Detroit	13,769	21,399	64.3%
Washington, D.C.	15,570	25,509	61.0%
New York	9,762	17,438	55.9%
Atlanta	10,970	20,118	54.5%
Los Angeles	9,190	17,444	52.6%
Baltimore	10,207	21,086	49.1%
Chicago	10,047	21,086	47.6%
Philadelphia	8,547	18,449	46.3%
New Orleans	10,431	18,211	57.2%

Table 3. Yearly Cost of Living in Selected U.S. Cities 1977

City	Income Levels Lower	Middle	Upper
New York, New York	$11,155	$19,972	$31,655
San Francisco	11,601	18,519	27,418
Washington, D.C.	11,084	18,026	26,454
Philadelphia	10,897	17,792	25,933
Detroit	10,400	17,427	25,550
Chicago	10,896	17,223	25,126
Baltimore	10,796	17,204	25,308
Los Angeles	11,134	17,126	25,880
Houston	9,921	15,488	22,421
Atlanta	9,594	15,483	22,421
Dallas	9,516	15,313	22,500
Baton Rouge	9,572	15,283	22,695

[a]Source: U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, Autumn 1977 Urban Family Budgets.

Table 4. Number of Black owned Businesses for Selected U.S. Metropolitan Areas 1969 and 1972

Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area	Number of Black Businesses 1969	1972
New York	7,753	11,282
Los Angeles-Long Beach	8,318	11,057
Washington, D.C.	7,768	9,726
Chicago	8,747	9,718
Philadelphia	6,246	6,278
Detroit	5,442	6,146
Houston	4,326	5,477
San Francisco-Oakland	3,358	4,313
Baltimore	2,522	3,994
Dallas-Ft. Worth	2,080	3,455
Atlanta	2,137	3,241
New Orleans	3,019	2,723

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1972).

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